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SUBJECT: South African Political Parties Have Embraced Social Media,  
But Is Anyone Listening?

11. SUMMARY: (U) Reportedly inspired by the dynamic e-campaign of President Obama, South African political parties have launched multifaceted digital platforms to reach voters in advance of the April 22 elections. Most parties now have targeted websites, voter activism forums, interactive media opportunities and blogs by party leaders, as well as outreach through Twitter and Facebook. However, in a country where only 10% of the population is online, media experts see little return on this investment in this election. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) According to a recent report, "Internet Access in South Africa," released by World Wide Worx, a South African technology research firm, the number of internet users in South Africa grew by 12.5% to 4.6 million users in 2008, equaling approximately 10.5% of South Africa's estimated population of 43,786,115. In contrast, over 90% of the population uses cell phones in South Africa. However, political parties have made little obvious effort to exploit this cheap and easy access to party members and voters.

Big Parties, Big Online Official Presence... What Ompact?

13. (U) South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), takes a government-focused approach to its online presence ([www.myanc.org](http://www.myanc.org)). Election information is buried in the site and there are only infrequent updates of events and press releases. The site features personal statements from ANC president and presidential candidate Jacob Zuma, as well as downloadable versions of the ANC's political platform. It also purports to feature blog entries from ANC leadership, but only seven entries have been submitted, with no entries on health, HIV/AIDS, youth or the economy. ANC spokesperson Jessie Duarte stated in a press report: "Our blog is a natural extension of the active listening, responding and engagement that the ANC has consistently done throughout its 97 years of existence. We see it as a 'virtual imbizo' [community meeting]....It's an extension of our engagement with citizens. More talking. More listening. And most importantly, more conversation." This policy is not evident on the official website, where the ANC has offered limited conversation at this level.

14. (U) The main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), has been the most dynamic player in the online campaign field. In addition to its official website (<http://www.da.org.za/>), the DA also has launched several niche sites, including a voter activism site (<http://contributetochange.org.za>) "designed to help deliver the South African dream to the rainbow people." It provides guidance for DA recruitment and electioneering, information on local DA events and groups, canned letters to the press, and tools to start political blogs. Shortly after the National Prosecuting Authority dropped corruption charges against the ANC's president, Jacob Zuma, the DA launched a special website soliciting donations to revive the legal case at <http://realanctoday.wordpress.com>. The DA has also promoted a "stealth marketing campaign" on Facebook, but

it relies primarily on tried-and-true traditional SA campaign models such as paper canvassing.

15. (U) The Congress of the People (COPE), a break-away faction of the ANC, has styled itself as a spoiler in this year's elections, hoping to capture the disaffected urban black ANC voter and white voters who view a vote for the DA as ineffectual. COPE has been criticized for failing to establish itself as a viable party and not running an effective campaign. Its official website (<http://www.congressofthepeople.org.za/>) is evidence of this -- an amateurish-looking site, the COPE official page details insider infighting and low-level policy squabbles. The COPE Forum (<http://forum.copeconnect.co.za/>), the interactive portion of the COPE official online infrastructure, provides updated news and the possibility to ask questions of COPE leadership but without a mechanism to receive responses.

16. (U) Other political parties, including South Africa's third largest party, the KwaZulu Natal-based Inkatha Freedom Party (23 seats in parliament, <http://www.ifp.org.za/>) and the United Democratic Movement (six seats in parliament, <http://www.udm2009elections.co.za/>), maintain a professional and election-targeted online presence. Both sites, as well as the sites of even smaller parties, such as the Independent Democrats (five seats in parliament, <http://www.id.org.za/>) and the African Christian Democratic Party (four seats in parliament, <http://www.acdp.org.za/index.php?page=home>) offer separate sites, or sub-sites, targeting youth voters (such as the DA's <http://www.youngleaders.org.za/>) and issue-specific theses.

17. (U) With very few exceptions, all SA party official sites are focused on providing canned information, rather than offering an

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interactive forum for voters to ask questions and demand answers. As Jude Mathurine, new media lecturer at Rhodes University, stated in an AFP report, "The beauty of online in Obama's model is that his key advisors and he took the time to engage with users online. Our leaders do not take the time to join in online chats, encourage questions and emails to MPs, or even Twitter."

Facebook and Twitter: Reaching New Voters or The Same Old Supporters?

18. (U) The mainstream parties, the ANC and DA, both have a significant Facebook presence but at levels that reflect internet use and saturation in their respective community bases. The DA's 18,000+ membership (similar to COPE's membership) is progressive, middle class and professional -- more likely to have computers at home and be inclined to join social networking groups. The DA Facebook page is complex and utilizes every conceivable avenue of social media: video, webchats, donations and more links to policy papers than on their static public website. While the public internet site prominently features and promotes Helen Zille, the DA leader, the Facebook page represents more of a collective effort, a movement. Helen Zille is also a frequent Twitter-er, publishing frank statements about how she views the current state of political affairs in SA, as well as updates on her speaking engagements and events.

19. (U) The ANC's 6,700 Facebook members also reflect a level of national support but perhaps among those without ready internet access or interest. The ANC page is static: no video, few forums, no link to 'stealth media campaigns.' The ANC also has over 330 followers on Twitter, but appears to treat Twitter as a press release feed for the party as it is not focused on elections and has no other value added.

110. (U) In stark contrast to its 'official' website, COPE has a very dynamic social media presence, with almost 1,900 discussion topics; 2,000 photos; 20 videos; and a whopping 20,800 members on Facebook. Interaction between party members and supporters is constant and colorful in the forums. Forums range from the latest COPE press release to opinions on the latest episode of South African Idol to more substantive issues, such as "Topic: I don't hate Zuma or the

ANC -- I just like COPE!" However, COPE's Twitter feed, with only 31 followers, generally focuses around media events and sees very little use by the party or its followers.

¶11. (U) The niche Inkatha Freedom Party only has 169 'members' on Facebook but also is tied to a number of sub-pages, including isiZulu language pages. Activity on the site is infrequent, with fewer than 25 total posts in the forum.

#### Everyone Has a Mobile Telephone

¶12. (U) Estimates state that over 90% of South Africa's population has a mobile telephone, but SA's political parties have not exploited this technology for the 2009 elections. While press reports claim "voters can join the UDM via SMS, download an ID election ring tone, make a mobile donation to COPE, or subscribe to the ANC's weekly SMS news alerts," (Mail and Guardian, March 2009), the average voter has no information on how to access this interactive technology. Of the main political parties, only the ANC features a prominently displayed application explaining how to register for mobile updates.

¶13. (U) A private company has stepped into the arena with a new platform for mobile telephones for the 2009 elections. Mig33 Qplatform for mobile telephones for the 2009 elections. Mig33 (www.mig33.com) is a mobile application that hosts platforms for social interactions, chatrooms and now South African political parties. However, despite media reports, mig33 appears to be an under-used resource with very little name recognition among South Africans. Still, the major parties, including the DA, ANC, ID and UDM, have created open groups in mig33 chat rooms.

¶14. (SBU) In contrast to the significant role that mobile telephone technology played in recent elections in Kenya and the Philippines, it appears that mobile telephone electioneering is only just beginning in South Africa. According to Consulate Durban poloff contacts, the DA does plan on sending 1.5 million "get out the vote" SMSs immediately before election day to motivate both committed voters and to influence the undecided vote. Reportedly, other political parties are requesting cell phone numbers from supporters to communicate directly with them on election day.

¶15. (U) COMMENT: The 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign captured the attention and imagination of most South Africans and

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has undoubtedly inspired new media campaign techniques in this South African election cycle. Despite low internet penetration, the parties recognize an urgent need to get online in order to at least keep up the appearance of being modern, tech-savvy and youth-oriented. While these innovative campaign techniques are unlikely to have significant impact on the outcome of this election, they are laying the groundwork for future political movements after the laying of broadband cable and the 2010 World Cup hopefully explode the now closely-controlled internet market in South Africa.  
END COMMENT.

LA LIME